A Companion Story to "She" and "Allan Quatermain"

already he was engulfed up to his middle and going down so rapidly that in another minute he would have vanished altogether. Well, we got him out, but not with ease, for that mud clung to him like the tentacles of an octopus. After this we were more careful.

Nor did this road run straight; on the contrary, it curved about and sometimes turned at right angles. The difficulties of that horrible place are beyond description, and indeed can scarcely be imagined. First, there was that of a kind of grass which grew among the roots of the reeds and had edges like knives. As Robertson and I wore gaiters, we did not suffer so much from it, but the poor Zulus with their bare legs were terribly cut and in some cases lamed.

Then there were the mosquitoes, which lived here by the million, and all seemed anxious for a bite; also the snakes of a peculiarly horrible kind that were numerous. A Zulu was bitten by one of them of so poisonous a nature that he died within three minutes. We threw his body into the swamp, where it vanished at once.

Lastly, there were the all-pervading stench and the intolerable heat of the place, since no breath of air could penetrate that forest of reeds, while a minor trouble was the multitude of leeches that kept fastening on our bodies. By looking one could see the creatures sitting on the under side of leaves with their heads stretched out, waiting to attack anything that went by.

During the day, except for the occasional rush of some great iguana or other reptile and the sound of the wings of the flocks of wild fowl passing over us from time to time, the march was deathly silent. But at night it was different, for then the bullfrogs boomed incessantly, as did the bitterns, while great swamp owls and other night-flying fowls uttered their weird cries. Also there were mysterious sucking noises caused, no doubt, by the sinking of areas of swamp, with those of bursting bubbles of foul, up-rushing gas. Strange lights, too, played about, will-o'-the-wisps or St. Elmo fires, as I believe they are called, that frightened the Zulus very much, since they believed them to be spirits of the dead.

In short, of all the journeys I have made, I think, with the exception of the passage of the desert on our way to King Solomon's Mines, that through this enormous swamp was the most miserable. Heartily did I curse myself for ever having undertaken such a quest in a wild attempt to allay that sickness, or rather to quench that thirst of the soul which I imagine at times assails most of those who have hearts and think.

Well, I was in for the business and must follow it to the finish, whatever that might be. After all, it was very interesting, and if there were anything in what Zikali said, it might become more interesting still. For, being pretty well fever-proof, I did not think I should die in that morass, as of course nine white men out of ten would have done, and, beyond it lay the huge mountain which day by day grew larger and clearer.

Nor did Hans, who, with a child-like trust, pinned his faith to the Great Medicine. This, he remarked, was the worst veld through which he had ever travelled, but as the Great Medicine would never consent to be buried in that stinking mud, he had no doubt that we should come safely through it some time. I replied that this wonderful medicine of his had not saved one of our companions, who had now made a grave in the same mud.

"No, Baas," he said, "but those Zulus have nothing to do with the medicine which was given to you and to me who accompanied you when we saw the Opener of Roads. Therefore perhaps they will all die, except Umslopogaas, whom you were told to take with you. If so, what does it matter, since there are plenty of Zulus, although there be but one Macumazahn and one Hans? Also the Baas may remember that he began by offending a snake, and therefore it is quite natural that the snake's brother should have bitten the Zulu."

"If you are right, he should have bitten me, Hans."

"Yes, Baas, and so no doubt he would have done had you not been protected by the Great Medicine, and me too had not my grandfather been a snake-charmer, to say nothing of the smell of the medicine being on me as well. The snakes know whom they should bite, Baas."

At last the swamp bottom began to slope upwards a little, with the result that as the land dried through natural drainage, the reeds grew thinner by degrees, until finally they ceased, and we found ourselves on firmer ground; indeed, upon the lowest slopes of the great mountain that I have mentioned, that now towered above us, forbidding and majestic.

I made a little map in my pocket-book of the various twists and turns of the road through that vast Slough of Despond, marking them from hour to hour as we followed its devious wanderings. On studying it at the end of that part of our journey I realized afresh how utterly impossible it would have been for us to thread this misty maze, where a few false steps would always have meant death by suffocation, had it not been for the spoor of those Amahagger travelling immediately ahead of us, who were acquainted with its secrets.

Had they been friendly guides they could not have done us a better turn. What I wondered was why they had not tried to ambush us in the reeds, since our fires must have shown them that we were close upon their heels. That they did try to burn us up was clear from certain evidences that I found, but fortunately at this season of the year in the absence of a strong wind the reeds were too green to catch fire. For the rest I was soon to learn the reason of their neglect to attack us in that dense cover.

They were waiting for a better opportunity.

CHAPTER X.

The Attack.

WE won out of the reeds at last, for which I fervently thanked God. We had emerged from them late in the afternoon, and being wearied out, stopped for a while to rest and eat of the flesh of a buck that I had been fortunate enough to shoot upon their fringe. Then we pushed forward up the slope, proposing to camp for the night on the crest of it a mile or so away, where I thought we should escape from the deadly mist in which we had been enveloped so long, and obtain a clear view of the country ahead.

"At length all was ready and there came that long trying wait, the most disagreeable part of a fight."

Following the bank of a stream which here ran down into the marsh, we came at length to this crest just as the sun was sinking. Below us lay a deep valley, a fold, as it were, in the skin of the mountain, well, but not densely wooded. The woods of this valley climbed up the mountain flank for some distance above it and then gave way to grassy slopes that ended in steep sides of rock, which were crowned by a black and frowning precipice of unknown height. There was, I remember, something very impressive about this towering natural wall. Indeed, the aspect of it thrilled me, I knew not why.

I observed, however, that at one point in the mighty cliff there seemed to be a narrow cleft down which, no doubt, lava had flowed in a remote age, and it occurred to me that up this cleft ran a roadway, probably a continuation of that by which we had threaded the swamp. The fact that through my glasses I could see herds of cattle grazing on the slopes of the mountains went to confirm this view, since cattle imply owners and herdsmen, and search as I would I could find no native villages on the slopes. The inference seemed to be that those owners dwelt beyond or within the mountains.

All of these things I saw and pointed out to Robertson in the light of the setting sun.

Meanwhile Umslopogaas had been engaged in selecting the spot where we were to camp for the night. Some soldierlike instinct, or perchance some prescience of danger, caused him to choose a place particularly suitable to defence. It was on a steep-sided mound that more or less resembled a gigantic ant-heap. Upon one side this mound was protected by the stream which, because of a pool, was here rather deep, while at the back of it was a collection of curious, piled-up water-worn rocks, which, lying one upon another, curved round the western side of the mound, so that practically it was only open for a narrow space, say, thirty or forty feet, upon that face of it which looked onto the mountain.

"Umslopogaas expect battle," remarked Hans to me with a grin. "Otherwise, with all this nice plain round us, he would not have chosen to camp in a place which a few men could hold against many. Yes, Baas, he thinks that those cannibals are going to attack us."

"Stranger things have happened," I answered, indifferently, and having seen to the rifles went to lie down, observing, as I did so, that the tired Zulus seemed already to be asleep. Only Umslopogaas did not sleep. On the contrary, he stood leaning on his axe, staring at the dim outlines of the opposing precipice.

"A strange mountain, Macumazahn," he said, "compared to it that of the Witch beneath which my kraal lies is but a little baby. I wonder what we shall find within it. I have always loved mountains, Macumazahn, ever since a dead brother of mine and I lived with the wolves in the Witch's lap, for on them I have had the best of my fighting."

"Perhaps it is not done with yet," I answered, wearily.

"I hope not, Macumazahn, since some is due to us after all these days of mud and stench. Sleep a while now, Macumazahn, for that head of yours, which you use so much, must need rest."

So I lay down and slept as soundly as ever I had done in my life, for a space of four or five hours, I suppose. Then, by some instinct perhaps, I awoke suddenly, feeling much refreshed in that sweet mountain air, a new man, indeed, and in the moonlight saw Umslopogaas striding toward me.

"Arise, Macumazahn," he said. "I hear men stirring beneath us."

At this moment Hans slipped past him, whispering:

"The cannibals are coming, Baas, a good number of them. I think they mean to attack us before dawn."

Then he passed behind me to warn the Zulus. As he went by I said to him:

"If so, Hans, now is the time for your Great Medicine to show what it can do."

"The Great Medicine will look after you and me, all right, Baas," he replied, pausing and speaking in Dutch, which Umslopogaas did not understand, "but I expect there will be fewer of those Zulus to cook for before the sun grows hot. Their spirits will be turned into snakes and go back into the reeds from which they say they were 'torn out,'" he added over his shoulder.

I should explain that Hans acted as cook to our party and it was a grievance with him that the Zulus ate so much of the meat which he was called upon to prepare. Indeed, there is never much sympathy between Hottentots and Zulus.

"What is the little yellow man saying about us?" asked Umslopogaas, suspiciously.

"He is saying that if it comes to battle, you and our men will make a great fight," I replied, diplomatically.

"Yes, we will do that, Macumazahn, but I thought he said that we should be killed and that this pleased him."

"Oh, dear, no!" I answered, hastily. "How could he be pleased if that happened, since then he would be left defenceless, if he were not killed, too. Now, Umslopogaas, let us make a plan for this fight."

So, together with Robertson, rapidly we discussed the thing. As a result, with the help of the Zulus, we dragged together some loose stones and the tops of three small thorn trees which we had cut down, and with them made a low breastwork, sufficient to give us some protection if we lay down to shoot. It was the work of a few minutes since we had prepared the material when we camped in case an emergency should arise.

Behind this we gathered and waited, Robertson and I being careful to get a little to the rear of the Zulus, who, it will be remembered, had the rifles which the Strathmuir bastards had left behind them when they bolted, in addition to their axes and throwing assegais. The question was how these cannibals would fight. I knew that they were armed with long spears and knives, but I did not know if they used those spears for thrusting or for throwing. In the former case it would be difficult to get at them with the axes, because they must have the longer reach. Fortunately, as it turned out, they did both.

At length all was ready and there came that long and trying wait, the most disagreeable part of a fight, in which one grows nervous and begins to reflect earnestly upon one's sins. Clearly the Amahagger, if they really intended business, did not mean to attack till just before dawn, after the common native fashion, thinking to rush us in the low and puzzling light. What perplexed me was that they should wish to attack us at all after having let so many opportunities of doing so go by.

Apparently these men were now in sight of their own home, where, no doubt, they had many friends, and by pushing on could reach its shelter before us, especially as they knew the roads and we did not. They had come out for a secret purpose that seemed to have to do with the abduction of a certain young white woman for reasons connected with their tribal statecraft or ritual, which is the kind of thing that happens not infrequently among obscure and ancient African tribes. Well, they had abducted their young woman and were in sight of safety and success in their objects, whatever these might be. For what possible reason, then, could they desire to risk a fight with the outraged friends and relatives of the young woman?

It was true that they outnumbered us and therefore had a good chance of victory, but on the other hand they must know that it would be very dearly won, and if it were not won that we should retake their captive, so that all their trouble would have been for nothing. Further, they must be as exhausted and travel-worn as we were ourselves, and in no condition to face a desperate battle.

To Be Continued

What Mrs. Veralour Said.

By F. Harris Deans.

"WHAT an exceedingly depressed-looking young man!" remarked Mrs. Veralour.

"Where?" demanded Miss Richards. "Oh, over there! That's only Tom!"

"Is that why he's so miserable?"

Miss Richards wrinkled her brows inquiringly.

"Because he is 'only Tom,'" explained Mrs. Veralour. "I haven't met him, have I?"

"I don't think so," was the careless reply. "He lives around here somewhere—his father's the Vicar, I believe."

"Oh!" commented Mrs. Veralour, gazing at her companion with an amused smile.

She smiled reminiscently.

"I, too, knew a vicar's son—years ago," she mentioned.

"I daresay, Mrs. Veralour. Most people have, haven't they?"

"Most girls, I suppose. There's something about them"—— She paused, lost in thought. "I suppose it's the reaction from their home life," she decided, rousing herself. "Quite a pretty boy, isn't he?"

Miss Richards shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"He's to be tried for the county," she mentioned, however.

"Made a century at Lord's, didn't he?" remarked Mrs. Veralour, with an approving nod.

"Ninety-eight. I thought you didn't know him, Mrs. Veralour."

"Oh," murmured Mrs. Veralour, vaguely, "they mostly make centuries, don't they?"

Despite the fact that they were strangers she shot a smile in the young man's direction

"I thought you were never going to take pity on us," she exclaimed, pleasantly, as the young man lurched up to them.

"I—I was thinking," he muttered, awkwardly; "I didn't notice." He stole a nervous glance at the girl.

"What unpleasant thoughts you must have!" commented Mrs. Veralour. "You looked so horribly miserable. You made us quite uncomfortable. Didn't he, Cicely?"

Miss Richards permitted a cold smile to break through the iciness of her countenance.

"Not me," she corrected; "I didn't even see you were there, Mr. Adams."

"I didn't see you, either," growled the young man, surlily.

Mrs. Veralour gave a contented sigh.

"What a fortunate old woman I am," she observed, brightly; "my sight is as good as ever."

She responded to Miss Richards's suspicious glance with a cheerful nod.

Suddenly she sat up with a start.

"I'm losing my memory, though!" she cried. "I promised to walk into the village with Mr. Blake."

"I met Mr. Blake going in that direction ten minutes ago," mentioned the young man.

"Merely as a blind," explained Mrs. Veralour, rising. "I can catch him up."

"I'll come with you, Mrs. Veralour," said Miss Richards, hastily, following her example.

Mrs. Veralour raised her eyebrows.

"My dear Cicely!" she protested. "Such tactlessness!" she remarked to the young man in an aside. "Besides, Mr. Blake is old enough to be my son."

As she hurried off Miss Richards resumed her seat and regarded the sky with a protesting eye.

The young man watched her apprehensively.

"She made me come up and speak," he muttered, after a few moments' silence.

"Yes," said Miss Richards, uninterestedly. "Well, she's gone now."

Mr. Adams moved restlessly in his chair.

"I suppose that means"—— He paused and kicked viciously at the turf. "Do you want me to go?"

"Oh, haven't you gone?" Miss Richards turned a faintly surprised eye in his direction, and then continued her contemplation of the sky.

"I know when I'm not wanted, anyhow," observed the young man, drearily.

A faint smile curved the girl's lips.

"What were you saying?" she inquired, after another pause.

"That I know when I'm not wanted," he said, curtly.

"Just so," said the girl. "I thought I must have misunderstood you."

And the young man dug up a piece of turf with his heel and scowled darkly at his handiwork.

"I don't see why you should be so down on me," he burst out.

"I'm not. I'm simply not interested in you."

"You were interested enough yesterday."

Miss Richards regarded him haughtily.

"I thought you were at least a gentleman."

"I thought you didn't think about me at all," he retorted.

The girl shrugged her shoulders scornfully.

Mr. Adams gazed at her with as much soul as an ordinary, healthy young man can contrive to get into his eyes.

"Don't you remember what you said yesterday?" he inquired, gently.

Miss Richards pondered a moment.

"Yes," she half whispered at length. Her head was bent, so that her companion failed to observe the vicious gleam in her eyes.

"Tell me," he pleaded, a smile of sickly sentiment devastating his countenance.

"I said," said Miss Richards, kindly complying with his request in cold, clear tones, "that you were a despicable lad, and I never wanted to speak to you again."

"Lad!" gasped the young man in broken accents.

"Or was it youth?" mused the girl.

"I—I meant before then," he explained, after an awkward pause; "when we were on the lawn. Don't you remember?"

"No," she said with decision. "I do not."

"All right," he said, sulkily, "don't remember then.

"I don't see," he went on, after a moment's indistinct mumbling, "what there is to make all this fuss about. Most men would have done the same."

"There's no reason for you to malign your sex," remarked Miss Richards.

"Malign! Well, I do like that, hanged if I don't!"

"Is there any need for profanity, either?" she inquired.

Her companion choked for a while in comparative silence.

"But hang—I mean, dash it all, you often say 'hang' yourself."

"Do I?" said Miss Richards. "I beg your pardon! I'm sorry if I have corrupted you."

"Here, I say!" cried Mr. Adams, desperately.

The girl, gazing pensively into the distance, ignored his incoherent murmurs of protest.

For a while he sat in moody silence, his wrongs working like yeast within him.

"I don't know what I've done," he wailed presently, in a voice in which irritation and pathos struggled for supremacy. "Just because I danced with a pretty girl."

Miss Richards raised surprised eyebrows.

"Pretty?" she echoed.

"If she hadn't been pretty," cried the young man, with all the beautiful tactfulness of youth, "you wouldn't be so riled. And I only danced twice with her, after all. Really, I didn't mean to cut your dance. Honestly, I forgot to put your name on my card. 'Pon my honor. You could have seen my card for yourself if you hadn't gone off in such a tearing rage."

"It really doesn't interest me," said the girl, frigidly, "whether you rubbed my name out or whether you didn't. I suppose you can please yourself whom you dance with."

"I'd tons sooner have danced with you," he murmured, miserably; "especially if I'd known you were going to take it like this."

Miss Richards placed her hand in front of what was intended to represent a yawn.

"Wouldn't you like a nice walk?" she suggested, languidly.

"Rather!" cried her companion, eagerly, his face lightening.

"Well, don't let me keep you," she said, kindly.

Mrs. Veralour, hidden by a clump of laurels, was gazing with great interest at some early roses, when Mr. Adams, melancholy and languid, hove into view.

Her discreet and sympathetic inquiries quickly drew the whole story from the wretched young man.

"For two pins I'd chuck myself in the river," he wound up, moodily.

Mrs. Veralour's face lit up.

"And can't you swim?" she inquired, interestedly.

Somewhat chilled, he admitted he could.

"And, anyhow, I haven't got two pins," murmured Mrs. Veralour, consolingly. "Not that I should have given them to you if I had!" she added, severly.

Mr. Adams grunted and shifted his feet uneasily.

"Where are you going?" demanded his questioner, accepting her dismissal.

With an effort the youth refrained from mentioning the first destination which came to his lips.

"Down to the river," he said, passing from one extreme to the other.

"Well, mind you don't tumble in," she advised, warningly.

"Unless," she added, "Cicely is there to see."

As Mr. Adams moved off, she stood for a while lost in thought, reflecting on the possibilities hinted at in her last remark.

Presently a smile, part benevolence and part humor, spread over her countenance.

With a little chuckle she turned and strolled in the direction from which the lovelorn youth had come. As she perceived Miss Richards in her old seat she forced the smile from her face and allowed an expression of anxiety tinged with horror to replace it.

"Have you quarrelled?" she asked anxiously. "He was going straight for the river when I saw him."

On the bank of the river Mr. Adams stood gazing disconsolately at the sparkling water.

Presently, beneath the influence of a warm sun, his gloomy intention evaporated, leaving behind merely the thought that he could swim.

It was a warm day and the water looked refreshingly cool. Half-unconsciously he took off his coat. Then he paused and pondered.

The river, he reflected, was somewhat too near to the Hall to render afternoon bathing wholly discreet. He replaced his coat with a sigh.

And yet. . . .

As he stood, one hand on the lapel of his coat and the other clutching irresolutely at his waistcoat, a gasping cry caused him to swing round hastily.

Before he had quite taken in the situation Miss Richards, white-faced and breathless, threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Tom," she cried, hysterically, "you mustn't."

"No," said Mr. Adams, moving one of the girl's arms to a more comfortable position round his neck, "certainly not. I won't."

Despite the fact that he was supporting most of Miss Richards's weight he was feeling entirely happy.

"What," he whispered softly, but with pardonable curiosity, "what is it I mustn't do?"

Miss Richards abruptly tore herself away and gazed at him with crimson cheeks.

"Oh!" she gasped, "do you mean to say you weren't going to, after all?"

"No," said Mr. Adams, soothingly; "that's all right. Yes. Do what?"

"Why—why, what Mrs. Veralour said."

"What Mrs. Veralour said?" he repeated, wondering blankly what she could have said. "Oh, that! Why, yes, of course."

With a tender sigh Miss Richards relapsed into his arms.

"To think," she whispered, with a not unnatural feeling of exaltation, "to think that you were going to drown yourself for my sake!"

Light came to Mr. Adams, and at the same moment his respect for Mrs. Veralour's veracity faded.

"Well—I won't now, anyhow," he said, earnestly.

Miss Richards smiled up at him wanly and gratefully. Then, with a luxurious sigh, she allowed her head to sink upon his shoulder.

"You dear!" she breathed, her lips parting in an inviting smile.

Mr. Adams accepted the invitation.